

PRIVATE LANDOWNER FOCUS GROUP MEETING SUMMARY
DECEMBER 17, 2007; RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

GROUP PROFILE

The Private Landowner focus group was held on December 17, 2007, in Richmond, VA, as part of a statewide effort to identify and evaluate issues of concern related to hound hunting in the state. Approximately nine people were invited to attend this focus group meeting. Invitees were selected because they had previously contacted the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (VDGIF) and expressed an interest in participating, because they had some involvement in hound hunting issues in the past, or because they were leaders in their community. Nine landowners attended the meeting; eight were men, one was a woman, and all were white. Participants owned a variety of land-types including pine plantations managed for timber, family farms, and residential properties. One participant owned several thousand acres of farm and forest land. Others had smaller tracts from less than ten acres to several hundred acres.

Several participants identified themselves as being hunters; one identified himself as a hound hunter. Some individuals also identified themselves as non-hunters who are supportive of hunting. Some participants indicated that they allow hunters to access their property for hunting through leases or other agreements.

FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

The focus group was conducted for approximately two hours. During that time, participants responded to a series of questions posed by the facilitator (in bold, below). A summary of responses is provided below, including direct quotes from meeting participants that help to illustrate any common themes or key points from the discussion.

In the area where you own land, have you seen any changes over the last 10 years in availability of lands for hunting with hounds? If you have seen changes, were they related to changes in land ownership, changes in attitudes of land owners, a combination of the two, or other factors?

Participants indicated that they have seen more development and subdividing of land in areas where they live. They observed that there is less farming going on and more land being used for smaller residences, often by people who have moved in from another state or area. Although hunting, including hound hunting, appears to continue in many of these places, participants indicated that there are conflicts related to hunting access as a result of landscape changes. One participant indicated that communication between different types of hunters and between hunters and landowners has improved the situation in his area.

“Some of the tracts of land are being bought by people who come in from another state or another area. They’re not familiar with dog hunting. They buy a piece of land and all of a

sudden they wake up one morning and there's a pack of hounds going across their land and 10 hunters lined up down their driveway and they haven't seen that before....I can see where the dog hunter's coming from because they're being squeezed for a place to hunt, from the standpoint of land."

"I've had one of the hunt clubs tell me that there's some housing development that's pushed them out of a particular area that they've been hunting."

"All the big farms except for ours have been sold for development, so you see survey stakes and other things. There are people still hunting that land while they're waiting for it to be developed."

"What I have seen change is smaller pieces of property are being hunted, and I mean real small pieces of property are being hunted. So that, even the most ethical dog hunter can't keep the animals on the track that they're supposed to be on. That is, I think, at least in our area, a big concern."

"Things have got a lot better in our area and it's come through communication as much as anything. Talking to the other hunt clubs....setting the rules down to what you expect and what you want to see and what you don't want to see. Same with the landowners. Talking to the landowners to find out what they want and what they don't want....They need to learn to talk to the landowners ahead of time."

"Most of the farming has stopped; most of the people have gotten out of it."

Have your experiences as a landowner dealing with hunters been mostly positive, mostly negative, or somewhere in between? If you have had negative experiences, please describe the problems you most often encounter, including any problems that are specific to hunting with hounds.

Some participants indicated that they had had many good experiences with hound hunters. Participants indicated that leasing to hound hunt clubs was a favorable arrangement. Several participants felt that the use of tracking collars had improved response time on hound retrieval.

"When I began to lease to these two hunt clubs, the noise level just dropped. Things have been going great ever since. They take care of the property, put up gates, protect my roads. But, that's because I let them have it. I'm getting a check."

"More and more of them are starting to use radio-collars....And that at least gives some confidence that they know where the dogs are."

"Whenever, in season or out of season, somebody else's dog is in our yard. Put my hands on that dog, it's got a phone number on its collar, I call it and within 30 minutes, especially if I've talked to somebody, they are at my house, gathering up their dog....I find that the hunters that have dogs around us are respectful and very interested in getting their dog back."

Participants also described several negative experiences related to hound hunting including harassment of pets, loss of personal recreation time (hunting, horseback riding), hounds running out of season, lining or hunting from the roads, lost hounds, and hounds running on posted property.

“Since we’ve been there—my wife also rides horses through the woods—we have not been able to use our property on Saturdays since the 5 years we were there because it’s always being used by dogs. And so we also have dogs...they’re poodles and bishons...and they don’t appreciate the hunting dogs coming through...and so in the beginning our dogs would run away.....Now we have to leave our dogs in on Saturdays.”

“When my bow hunting and my black powder hunting gets messed up before the season even starts, that kind of bugs me....The dogs being released out of season disturbs my hunt.”

“My wife wants to take [the dogs] to animal control....Whether or not their licensed or not we don’t know, they don’t have their rabies tags on the dog collar either. Of course with our dogs, my wife’s afraid.”

“After calling the same people several times during the hunting season, it gets kind of old.”

“So I went up and I can begin to tell you how many trucks, lined up right down the road and over in our pasture with a big posted sign, is a little boy with a gun.... ‘Oh, we’re just getting our dogs.’”

How were the problems you encountered resolved? Were you able to work out problems with hunters? Did you call for help from VDGIF law enforcement? Was the help you received from law enforcement adequate? If not, how could it be improved?

A few participants were able to resolve problems without law enforcement through agreements to lease property that was previously hunted without permission by hound hunters. Participants indicated that in many areas law enforcement is not effective in helping to address problems related to hunting with hounds. In some areas, there are not enough law enforcement officers to respond in a timely manner; in other areas hound hunters reportedly avoid places where law enforcement officers are patrolling. Some participants felt that enforcement of laws is difficult because of the nature of the laws themselves.

“Part of the reason why I lease to 2 hunt clubs is because I got tired of chasing them off my land for 3 or 4 years. It was about to come to blows. And I didn’t have the energy for it. They got tired of me chasing them. But we finally reached an agreement. I basically let them have it. You guys hunt it; write me a check. And I still have another part of the farm I can hunt, I just won’t hunt this part of the farm.”

“We had the same runaround trying to keep people off of it. So, about 10 years ago we leased half of it to a hunt club. They took ownership of it, responsibility for it. They keep the fences, gates closed, they don’t drive their trucks on it, they pick up the trash along the

highway....They've been excellent recreational partners. Since then, most of the other farms in the area have come up with similar arrangements."

"The situation in our area has improved a lot in the last couple years, mainly because the game warden moved in across the road."

"Where I am the game warden is always a county away....The soonest you can expect him to arrive is probably 45 minute to an hour."

"With respect to hound hunting, there are really no regulations for the game warden to enforce."

"It's not really viable; you can't get the game warden there quick enough to get these guys."

What do you believe to be the most important issues that need to be addressed in this review of the issues surrounding hunting with hounds?

Participants identified several issues that should be addressed including the issue of the right-to-retrieve law as it relates to private property rights, dogs running out of season, and hounds interfering with domestic pets. While participants felt that problems with hound hunting stemmed from a few unethical hunters, they were also concerned that there are no repercussions for unethical behavior. Further, they were concerned that the actions of a few hound hunters were giving hunters in general a bad image.

"They can go on prohibited lands to look for their dogs. That means there is no such thing as prohibited lands. You can put up all the posted signs you want...but, if you're allowed to go on that property, then it's not prohibited."

"The other problem that we have is the dogs are run out of the season. It's not unusual anytime during the year for these hunters to let their dogs go on a Sunday night, or a Monday night, or a Wednesday night and the dogs run all night long...we have to listen to the barking...and our dogs are barking just as loud inside the house."

"There's really no way to do any quality deer management on our place as long as we have the people trespassing on it."

"I don't think you can paint all those dog hunters with the same brush because some are trying to do right and some are out there just to have a good time and that's their recreation and they ought to be cracked down on. Folks who don't obey the laws and if the law says if its posted you don't turn loose on it..."

"The law doesn't say that. That's the problem. There is no law that says a guy can't...turn 10 dogs loose on 5 acres."

“This is hurting a sport that I love. I think something has to be done to protect, not only hound hunting, but deer hunting in general. This is a deer hunting problem. This is a bad image for all hunters.”

What do you think is the most appropriate way to deal with those issues (explore one issue at a time, choosing the 2 or 3 issues that surface most often)?

Some participants felt that there is a need to increase accountability of hound hunters through licensing of clubs, hunters, and/or dogs. Others felt that clubs can police themselves. A few participants felt that radio-tracking can help make dog retrieval more efficient and maybe reduce problems. Some participants also felt the need to emphasize ethics, perhaps through hunter education focused on relevant ethical issues. Some participants felt that hunters should make a good faith effort to contact landowners prior to the hunt, if they might be hunting on or near their property, others were concerned that they would get too many calls. Some participants also felt that there should be statewide laws to address hunting in the roads.

“See, your DMAP example of a club losing their privilege to participate in DMAP is a great example because there is no privilege that you can lose with respect to hound hunting....If you want to turn 50 hounds loose on 10 acres, and have them run all over everybody’s prohibited land, you’re not going to lose the privilege to do that because there is no regulation that says you can’t.”

“That’s where the radio-collars come in handy to help get you closer to them, quicker.”

“There’s a couple hunt clubs in our area too...they are very good. They have a lot of rules...They are very restrictive.”

“Just teaching somebody gun safety in a hunter education course doesn’t teach any—it’s sad that we have to teach an adult not to go on somebody’s property, or not to line up on the road, or to respect another landowner.”

“You’ve got to make some contact with that landowner either prior to the hunt or prior to retrieving those dogs. Make some attempt to say, I’m going to this place or I’m going to get these dogs. Or sometime prior to that hunt say, we hunt that tract next to you and if our dogs get away we’d like to come get them and create some kind of arrangement ahead of time.”

“Move the distance back from the road...unless the state can declare it a blanket wide 100 feet from the road, I don’t know what that’s going to accomplish.”

Do you believe that any of the laws and regulations that govern hunting should be changed to address the problems you have encountered? If so, how?

Participants felt that laws related to the right to retrieve and access to private property need to change. They felt that hunters should get permission to be on private land. Participants also felt that hunt clubs and dogs should be certified. In addition, some felt that a minimum acreage requirement is needed.

“I think requiring that hunters have written permission to be on someone else’s property with their dog.”

“I think you have to put some teeth behind the words ‘prohibited land’ and the excuse ‘my dogs can’t read, that’s no good.’”

“For a landowner not to have the right to say who cannot go on his property is just wrong. There is no way someone should be able to come on my property without my permission. That law needs to be repealed. They should have to get permission to come on a private landowner’s property.”

“We’ve got to do something with regulations and state laws...and part of that is they’ve got to mark their hounds so we know which hunt club has these hounds when they come through, we can catch them and read their collar....And I can take that information and go find the game warden and tell them these guys were on my land.”

“I think this idea of some kind of certification thing is probably the way to go, but I really believe it has to include some minimum amount of acreage. I look at this in the larger context of what’s happening to the population in Virginia. We’ve got almost 7 million people now. The state is projecting that over the next 15 years we’ll get close to 9 million. [Hound hunting] is allowed in the eastern part of the state where the population density is the greatest in those counties. If we don’t do something to control it and regulate it,...I think it will turn around and bite hunting badly.”

“I think the main thing that we’ve seen is that the problems that we’ve listed are not illegal. It’s legal to do every one of them. So they’re not breaking laws. It seems to me the solution is a law.”

Are there any other important issues that this group should discuss?

Some participants spoke about the benefits of good communication between hunters and landowners, pointing out how this has helped partition resources and activities in their area. Others felt that good communication needs to go both ways, and were concerned that even with communication hunters may still disregard the wishes of landowners. They continued to discuss problems with hound hunting in small acreage. Participants questioned the inclusion of other hound hunters, indicating that they felt deer hound hunting was primarily the cause of issues in their areas. One participant commented on how interesting it was that mounted fox hunters seem to be able to keep track of their dogs. Another participant noted that deer hunting seems to involve trucks, often driving fast, while other hound hunting does not. Participants asked if any of the unethical hunters had come to any focus group meetings.

SUMMARY

The participants in this group were primarily from parts of Virginia where deer hound hunting occurs. A range of landowner types was represented in this focus group. In addition, some of the

participants indicated that they owned and managed land for hunting. Most participants had directly experienced conflicts with hound hunters including hunting without permission, hounds running on posted property, disruption of still hunting, and hunters lining the roads. Although participants believed that there are many ethical hound hunters out there, they still felt that additional laws or regulations are needed to make unethical hound hunters more accountable. Consistently, this group stressed that many of the problems they are having are legally allowed, making it difficult to stop them from happening. Participants suggested that solutions to these issues should include minimum acreage requirements, licensing or certification of hunt clubs and hounds, and required permission of landowners to access private property. In addition, many felt that greater effort should be taken to foster ethical behavior. While landowners in this focus group were not against hound hunting, they did strongly feel that there was a need for greater controls on this activity. Greater regulation, they reasoned, would help to improve the image of the sport and help to preserve hound hunting, and hunting in general, in an ever-growing Virginia.